

## Chapter 126:

### Poison Pill

It was late morning, the sun high in the sky. Clive arrived at the cloud palace, finding someone standing near the platform that touched the shore.

"Acolyte Pellin," he greeted.

"Mister Standish," she greeted in return.

"Are you waiting for something?" he asked.

"I'm waiting for Mr Asano," she said. "I'm going to deliver a gift from my goddess, as promised."

"Jason has been gone for almost two weeks," Clive said. "I take it, as an acolyte of Knowledge, that you know something I don't."

"He's on the Adventure Society campus right now," she said. "He's speaking with Cassandra Mercer and will be done shortly."

Clive looked up at the towering cloud palace.

"Then I think I'll wait as well," he said. "My days have been busy, but I can spare a few minutes. It must be an odd experience, having knowledge placed into your mind by your goddess."

"I'm told the sensation is similar to using a skill book," Gabrielle said. "I've never used one myself but it's gentler than a skill book, from what I'm told. The goddess doesn't impart so much information at once."

"I always imagined it would be disconcerting," he said. "I've spent so much of my life in pursuit of knowledge that having it just turn up in my head would be quite alarming."

"The goddess is aware of your pursuit, Mr Standish, and she loves you for it."

"Oh, um... thanks?"

"He's here," she said, turning away from Clive.

Clive followed her gaze to spot, spotting Jason and becoming slightly alarmed at what he saw. Jason was still wearing his battle robes, which he rarely did in the city. His gaze was normally sharp and focused or roaming and observant, but today he looked puffy-eyed and disoriented.

"I don't suppose your goddess told you if he's been drinking?" Clive asked.

"He hasn't," Gabrielle said. "Cassandra Mercer just ended their relationship."

"Oh," Clive said sadly, then turned a narrow gaze on Gabrielle. "I think I'm starting to understand why Jason complains about your goddess and privacy."

Gabrielle gave Clive a disapproving glare.

“She is Knowledge,” Gabrielle said. “Knowledge is hers to disseminate as she sees fit.”

Jason drew closer, giving Clive a sad and tired smile.

“G’day Clive; it’s been a while.”

He greeted Gabrielle with a nod. “Acolyte.”

“Mr Asano.”

Jason turned back to Clive.

“They must be keeping you busy at the Magic Society by now.”

“They are,” Clive said. “I don’t have answers, yet, but I’m making progress.”

“How’s your new assistant?”

“She has some unusual gaps in her knowledge, but she works hard and learns fast. Everything I could hope for.”

“Good. Have they been talking about bringing in more astral magic specialists?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Clive asked.

“Heard what?” Jason asked. “I’ve been chasing monsters through wetlands for two weeks.”

“The events in our astral space were not unique. There have been incidents in other astral spaces all around the world.”

“That’s disturbing,” Jason said. His unfocused expression grew sharp as his muddled brain started turning over.

“It explains why there were no opponents above silver in ours for an operation of that scale,” he said. “Whoever they are, they needed their high-rankers for the high-magic areas. There was no reason to anticipate gold-rank adventurers here, so they could save them for other regions.”

“That’s been the consensus,” Clive said. “At least it means that if I don’t manage to unveil their intentions, many others are working on the problem elsewhere.”

“Don’t talk yourself down, Clive,” Jason said. “If you’re not convinced you have the goods, I’ll be convinced for you. You’ll get there.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Look, I have to go speak with Rufus but I wanted to check in on you. You’ve had people worried, taking off without a word like that.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I’m fine, as you see.”

“Yes,” Clive said, unconvinced. “It’s good to see you back.”

Clive cast an uncertain gaze at Gabrielle.

“I’m sorry about Cassandra, Jason.”

Jason’s face went very still, then turned slowly on the acolyte.

“Thank you, Clive,” he said, voice flinty as his eyes locked onto Gabrielle. “Come find me when you have some free time. We’ll get a drink.”

“It may be a little while but that sounds good,” Clive said. He set out across the cloud bridge to enter the palace.

“I shouldn’t have told him that,” Gabrielle said apologetically.

“You shouldn’t even know about it. I know I’ve been jokey about your goddess and her privacy issues but she had no right to tell you that.”

Gabrielle’s expression went stiff.

“She’s a goddess, Mr Asano. She has whatever rights she wants.”

“I’d respond to that, but she already knows what I have to say because I do. In case she doesn’t tell you, it involved a lot of bad language and several physiologically implausible suggestions.”

“You should show her more respect.”

“Respect is earned.”

“She earned it by being a goddess.”

“That’s a tyrant’s reasoning. If you’ll excuse me, I’m leaving.”

“Wait. I came here to give you something.”

She had a small satchel slung over her shoulder, from which she took a wooden case. Holding it out, she opened it to reveal three objects in the padded interior. Two were awakening stones and the other a small stone square. It looked similar to the world-phoenix token in Jason’s inventory, but a washed-out blue colour instead of vibrant red.

“She knows that you will confront the people responsible for the death of your friend,” Gabrielle said. “She expects you to encounter them more than once. She chose a gift that would better prepare you for those encounters.”

Jason touched a hand to the first awakening stone.

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Item: [Divine Awakening Stone of Inevitability] (transcendent rank, epic)

*An awakening stone crafted by a god to bestow a specific aura power. (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Doom essence, unawakened doom essence ability, no aura essence ability.
  - Effect: Awakens the aura essence ability [Inescapable Doom].
  - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
  - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
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Jason frowned at the description, which troubled him in several regards. He focused on the listed ability.

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Ability: [Inevitable Demise] (Doom)

- Aura (magic).
  - Cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Effect (iron): Enemies within the aura have any affliction immunities, including inherent immunities, treated as complete resistance. This resistance can be reduced by ordinary resistance-reduction effects. This is a magic effect.
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He wasn't able to use the stone as each person could only awaken the one aura. Presuming the tablet was some kind of solution to that, it was the next object he touched. the square tablet.

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Item: [Soul-Purgation Tablet (aura)] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
  - Uses remaining: 1/1.
  - You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?
- 

Like the world-phoenix token, this item was too powerful for Jason's ability to discern its characteristics. After looking at it for a moment, the description changed.

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Item: [Soul-Purgation Tablet (aura)] (transcendent rank, legendary)

*A tablet with the power to remove an aura essence ability. Cannot be forcibly used on another by any means. (consumable, soul-shaping).*

- Requirements: Awakened aura essence ability.
- Effect: Removes an existing aura essence ability.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.
  
- **Warning:** Information on this ability has been provided by an outside source and cannot be verified.
  
- You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?

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He didn't even realise that removing an essence ability was even possible, unless it was a god taking away what they'd given out themselves. After looking over the description for a moment, he touched the second awakening stone.

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Item: [Divine Awakening Stone of Persistence] (transcendent rank, rare)

*An awakening stone crafted by a god to bestow a specific spell. (consumable, awakening stone).*

- Requirements: Dark essence, unawakened dark essence ability.
  - Effect: Awakens the spell essence ability [Dark Descent].
  - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
  - You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?
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Jason checked the ability.

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Ability: [Curse of Isolation] (Dark)

- Spell (curse, magic).
  - Cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  - Effect (iron): This spell cannot be resisted. Periodically inflicts an instance of [Dark Descent]; this is a curse effect.
  - [Dark Descent] (affliction, magic, stacking): Target has their perception distance, the effect of their perception ability and resistance to all afflictions reduced by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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The three items would make Jason much more effective against enemies immune to his afflictions. Various types of monsters were not flesh and blood, but the abilities the two stones offered would allow him to act as if they were. Given the army of constructs he heard about from the expedition members, if he really did encounter them then such abilities would be immensely useful.

"According to the goddess," Gabrielle said, "your current abilities are ill-suited to your fated enemies. These gifts were crafted by her specifically to rectify this. She said you would recognise their usefulness."

"Yeah," he said. "It's a shiny red apple, alright."

He snapped the case shut in Gabrielle's hands.

“Thanks, but no thanks. She chose the moment to offer me this, didn’t she?”

“She said you could use some good news.”

“No,” he said, voice tired. “She sent you now because I’m emotional and vulnerable to making a rash decision.”

Gabrielle glared at Jason.

“My goddess doesn’t lie.”

“She has all the knowledge in the world and near-infinite power,” Jason said. “I bet the god of deceit looks at her with admiration.”

Gabrielle shoved the box back into her bag and conjured a heavy iron staff into her hand. She raised the end to just under Jason’s chin.

“Watch your words, Jason Asano. I will only tolerate them so far.”

He gave her a look of weary disdain. “This is the part where your boss tells you to leave.”

She opened her mouth to respond, then froze.

“See?” he asked. “I don’t know what possible use I am to her but she wants me for something. For all I know, she’s provoking this response because she wants me angry. I’m not stupid enough to think I can out-game her. I do think she made a genuine mistake here, though. She told me once that people constantly surprise her, and I think that’s true. She knows everything, but that gives her a blind spot. She is as close to anyone to seeing a person’s optimal choice in any situation, yet we constantly act against our own interest. It must drive her crazy.”

Gabrielle’s agitation was rising while Jason stood in front of her, just looking tired.

“You think to know my goddess? You think she has flaws for the likes of you to see?”

“Sure,” Jason said. “Gods are big-picture types, older than we can imagine. I bet they have all kinds of trouble understanding the thoughts of short-lived wretches like us.”

“Blasphemer!”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It’s kind of my thing.”

Again Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak only to stop. Knowledge appeared in person next to Gabrielle, placing a hand on her shoulder.

“That’s enough dear,” she said. “Time to run along back to the temple.”

“Yes, Goddess,” Gabrielle said, bowing her head before walking away with an angry stride.

As in their last meeting, the goddess looked like an ordinary person. Despite this, she radiated glory, even with her aura fully suppressed.

“I made a mistake, here,” she said.

“Unless that’s what you want me to think,” Jason said.

“You are making a mistake as well,” she said. “The same one Sophie Wexler has been making. Don’t push away an incredible opportunity out of an instinctive mistrust.”

“If I was her, I wouldn’t trust me either.”

“So suspicious. You think my gift is a poison pill.”

“If you wanted to give me something to help me deal with the people who killed Farrah, you could just tell me where to find them.”

“You know better than that,” she said. “If I start telling mortals how to solve all their problems, where does it end? If I tell them how to fix everything, then life becomes a puppet show where I hold all the strings. The other gods would not stand for that and neither would you.”

“I can’t fight a god.”

“We both know it wouldn’t stop you from trying. I may not tell people the things I know, so as to let them lead their lives, but I do make exceptions for my followers.”

“You want me to worship you? You can’t seriously think I would.”

“Don’t be so hasty. Come into my church in full faith and trust and I will tell you about the people who killed Farrah.”

“Don’t say her name.”

“I’ll tell you who killed your friend. Who they are, where they are. What they’re doing and how to stop them. All this I will give you, in return for your faith.”

“You mean obedience.”

“I am not Dominion. In faith to me, there is no obedience; only loyalty. Do not rush to reject this offer. Take the time to consider it objectively. Think of what that knowledge can do. The lives it can save. And that is not the end. Follow me and there is countless good you can do with the knowledge I will gift you.”

“Can I tell Clive about gravity?”

“You don’t understand gravity.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I can see it.”

“You can see gravity?”

“I’m a goddess.”

“That must suck. Not a lot of hills left to climb. You must feel purposeless.”

“You cannot aggravate me, Jason Asano.”

“That’s the advantage of being mortal; I can set goals. If you want something, you have it.”

“I want you to worship me.”

“I guess you can have goals,” Jason said. “You know what I know, so you know what I think you’re full of, and where I’d like you to stick your offer.”

“You’re letting your heart rule your head. I will give you some time to consider.”

Jason gave a bitter, malevolent laugh.

“This must be frustrating for you,” he said. “You can’t predict my reactions yet know them immediately. You see how every approach you take just pushes me further away. Assuming you’re not trying to push me away for some reason I can’t see because I’m not an all-knowing immortal.”

“We will speak again when you are more reasonable.”

“But that’s why you picked now, right? I’m angry and miserable. Not thinking straight. And here you are with the handy-dandy tools to vent my rage on a nice, deserving target. I hope you really did make a mistake and this isn’t what you wanted. It makes me feel good to think of you realising how wrong this has gone, step by step. But you know that.”

“There will be times in the future when you need me, Jason Asano.”

“You know that, do you? Because it sounds like you’re just guessing.”

“Not many gods would tolerate this kind of insolence.”

“Smite me, then.”

She gave him a sad smile.

“We will talk again, Jason Asano. I hope to find that with a cooler head, you make better choices.”

She vanished, leaving Jason alone.

“I’ve got some bad news for you lady,” he said to the air. “Making bad life choices is kind of my thing.”

“You seem to have a lot of things,” Emir said, suddenly appearing next to Jason.

“I’m versatile,” Jason said. “Does no one in this world respect privacy?”

“A goddess appeared on my doorstep,” Emir said. “Did you really expect me not to take a look?”

“She let you. She wants you to tell Rufus about her offer.”

“That would be ill-advised,” Emir said. “Rufus very much wants vengeance for Farrah. He would push you hard to take the offer, making his friendship another cost of refusal.”

“Yeah, she’s sneaky,” Jason said. “She’ll probably see to it he finds out anyway.”

“What will you do if she does?”

“What I always do,” Jason said. “The best I can with what I have.”

Emir nodded.



“I have some things to talk with you about myself, but now is not the time. You haven’t even really got back yet, standing here on the doorstep. I would appreciate it if you come find me sometime in the next few days.”

“I can do that.”